

Nationalism and Identity in a New World Multi-Racial Society: The Case Study of Guyana

Robert J. Moore

The end of empire usually means for its former subjects the beginning of a search: a search for a political framework to make independence meaningful, a search for suitable economic relationships to make it profitable, and in some societies instantly, in others belatedly, a search for a cultural identity to make it sacramental.

The quest for cultural identity can be as painful and as problematic as the quest for political stability or economic growth. This is true not only for societies already old before the imposition of Empire, like India; it is also more urgently true of societies which are the creations of Empire like those in the Caribbean. In this article we are concerned with the quest for identity in Guyana and we have chosen this country as a case study because it is more truly multi-racial than most other Caribbean societies; because of the violent tensions between races which accompanied the move to independence; and finally because of the initiatives taken by the Guyanese to come to grips with the fundamental question of who they really are.

Although Guyana was (and still is) inhabited by Amerindian tribes when Europeans first intruded on the silence of its rivers, yet the European presence created a society in which the Amerindians were merely vulgar fractions. Having failed to make slaves out of them, the British administrators and planters – who governed Guyana from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century – did the next best thing; they made them catchers of slaves, thus turning them into loyal allies of white society against the Black desire for freedom.

Nationalism and Identity in a New World Multi-Racial Society: The Case Study of Guyana

Robert J. Moore

The end of empire usually means for its former subjects the beginning of a search: a search for a political framework to make independence meaningful, a search for suitable economic relationships to make it profitable, and in some societies instantly, in others belatedly, a search for a cultural identity to make it sacramental.

The quest for cultural identity can be as painful and as problematic as the quest for political stability or economic growth. This is true not only for societies already old before the imposition of Empire, like India; it is also more urgently true of societies which are the creations of Empire like those in the Caribbean. In this article we are concerned with the quest for identity in Guyana and we have chosen this country as a case study because it is more truly multi-racial than most other Caribbean societies; because of the violent tensions between races which accompanied the move to independence; and finally because of the initiatives taken by the Guyanese to come to grips with the fundamental question of who they really are.

Although Guyana was (and still is) inhabited by Amerindian tribes when Europeans first intruded on the silence of its rivers, yet the European presence created a society in which the Amerindians were merely vulgar fractions. Having failed to make slaves out of them, the Dutch administrators and planters – who governed Guyana from the early seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century – did the next best thing; they made them catchers of slaves, thus turning them into useful allies of white society against the Black desire for freedom.

The British, who governed Guyana from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the nineteen-sixties, confirmed the Amerindians in this role. But their utility died with the abolition of slavery; and thereafter British administrators ruefully pondered on the inscrutable ways of providence which had paradoxically created a race whose functions were so uncertain, only to deliver it to certain extinction. Significantly, when Guyanese two decades ago began their search for identity, they looked upon the Amerindians with almost imperial eyes as gentle irrelevances in the great quest before them. It is only recently that more farseeing policies have been devised and eminent men are seeing Amerindians as a crucial factor in the search for the Guyanese self. But of this we shall say more later.

The Dutch and British planters, in their appetite for labour to make their plantations profitable, cast their net wide. Black slaves were brought from West Africa on the celebrated Middle Passage up to 1807 when the slave trade was abolished; and after the abolition of slavery in 1833 Portuguese from Madeira, Irish and Scots labourers, Black Americans, Sierra Leonians, Maltese, Germans and Chinese were at various times imported. But the most numerous – and, as it turned out, the most important – group of immigrants, both because of their economic utility and their powerful sense of ethnicity were the Indians, who began arriving in Guyana in 1838 and did not stop until 1917.

All these immigrants were imported to serve frankly economic ends and the multi-racial society which was willy-nilly being created gave administrators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries no great twinges of conscience and few fears for the future. Convinced that the empire was set to run for several centuries, they believed that they had *time* in which to turn a medley assortment of races into a unified society and they knew that they had the *power* to prevent any tensions existing between the races from disturbing the imperial peace. They saw it as their job during the nineteenth century to 'civilise' the Black man who possessing, as they thought, nothing but a 'barbarous' past must have nothing but a British future. As for the Indians and Chinese, they would be slowly converted from their curious oriental ways, not by a forced policy of assimilation through schools, but by the subtler policy of assimilation through status; recognition and approval would only be given by the imperial authorities to individuals of these races who took the trouble to Anglicise themselves. The old imperialists were not only convinced of their power but satisfied with their infallibility. Truth was indivisible and clearly British.

But the empire was not only a *summum bonum* to its chief administrators, it was something of a religion to many of its subjects as well. In Guyana and throughout the British West Indies, the mulattoes, those

people of mixed origin, who sought to whiten their souls if they could not always whiten their genes, looked upon the empire as the embodiment of the highest human achievements: a combination of humane-ness and order, of Christianity and law. These people in Guyana (and in the West Indies generally) were the great collaborators of empire, and their conviction in this matter was strengthened by their proximity to Latin America whose governments they considered to be banditry legitimised and whose social order they believed existed at the point of a gun. If the rest of the population were not always British in fact, they were British in ambition, especially the Blacks and the Portuguese; the former because they realised that their only road upwards was by means of education, and the latter because they realised that their commercial success would only be socially acceptable if they refined it with a British veneer. The Empire for Imperialist and Colonial alike was a kind of Universal, not only in the geographic but in the intellectual sense as well. It had the compulsion of history, the impressiveness of power and the mystique of a religion. Many Colonials convinced themselves that its best was better than anybody else's and its worst was not as bad as the imperial systems of the French and Dutch.

To reject so pervasive a Universal was intellectually difficult even if it was politically desirable. But in the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties the question of rejection had not yet arisen in Guyana or in the rest of the West Indies for that matter. There was, however, one racial group in Guyana whose attitude to things British was ambivalent – the East Indians. In the nineteenth century many of them availed themselves of the opportunity written into their contracts to return to India. Many more of them kept the possibility of returning open, even when they were rooting themselves in the soil by acquiring land or making themselves wealthy by trade. In the early twentieth century Commissioners appointed by the Indian government visited Guyana to inquire into the working and living conditions of the indentured Indians. Hindu and Moslem missionaries also visited the country to revive their flagging religious energies. Official India seemed to care about their welfare and Religious India about their souls. This helped to preserve a powerful sense of the presence of India in Guyana.

On another level India was important too. The small group of educated Indians in the nineteen-twenties and thirties were aware that Indian civilisation possessed many features which even the Imperial British, generally contemptuous of the native cultures, had shown a warm admiration for. As the Nationalist Party gained ground in India Gandhi, Nehru and their followers also preached the antiquity of Indian culture, its equality and sometimes even its superiority to the manners and morals of the British. But before the nineteen-forties it was not clear to anyone that Home Rule for India would spell the

The British, who governed Guyana from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the nineteen-sixties, confirmed the Amerindians in this role. But their utility died with the abolition of slavery; and thereafter British administrators ruefully pondered on the inscrutable ways of providence which had paradoxically created a race whose functions were so uncertain, only to deliver it to certain extinction. Significantly, when Guyanese two decades ago began their search for identity, they looked upon the Amerindians with almost imperial eyes as gentle irrelevances in the great quest before them. It is only recently that more farseeing policies have been devised and eminent men are seeing Amerindians as a crucial factor in the search for the Guyanese self. But of this we shall say more later.

The Dutch and British planters, in their appetite for labour to make their plantations profitable, cast their net wide. Black slaves were brought from West Africa on the celebrated Middle Passage up to 1807 when the slave trade was abolished; and after the abolition of slavery in 1833 Portuguese from Madeira, Irish and Scots labourers, Black Americans, Sierra Leonians, Maltese, Germans and Chinese were at various times imported. But the most numerous – and, as it turned out, the most important – group of immigrants, both because of their economic utility and their powerful sense of ethnicity were the Indians, who began arriving in Guyana in 1838 and did not stop until 1917.

All these immigrants were imported to serve frankly economic ends and the multi-racial society which was willy-nilly being created gave administrators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries no great twinges of conscience and few fears for the future. Convinced that the empire was set to run for several centuries, they believed that they had time in which to turn a medley assortment of races into a unified society and they knew that they had the power to prevent any tensions existing between the races from disturbing the imperial process. They saw it as their job during the nineteenth century to 'civilise' the Black man who possessing, as they thought, nothing but a 'barbarous' past must have nothing but a British future. As for the Indians and Chinese, they would be slowly converted from their 'oriental ways', not by a forced policy of assimilation through compulsion, but by the subtler policy of assimilation through status; recognition and approval would only be given by the imperial authorities to individuals of these races who took the trouble to conform to themselves. The old imperialists were not only convinced of their power but satisfied with their infallibility. Truth was indivisible and they were British.

The empire was not only a *summum bonum* to its chief administrators but something of a religion to many of its subjects as well. In the British West Indies, the mulattoes, those

people of mixed origin, who sought to whiten their souls if they could not always whiten their genes, looked upon the empire as the embodiment of the highest human achievements: a combination of humanness and order, of Christianity and law. These people in Guyana (and in the West Indies generally) were the great collaborators of empire, and their conviction in this matter was strengthened by their proximity to Latin America whose governments they considered to be banditry legitimised and whose social order they believed existed at the point of a gun. If the rest of the population were not always British in fact, they were British in ambition, especially the Blacks and the Portuguese; the former because they realised that their only road upwards was by means of education, and the latter because they realised that their commercial success would only be socially acceptable if they refined it with a British veneer. The Empire for Imperialist and Colonial alike was a kind of Universal, not only in the geographic but in the intellectual sense as well. It had the compulsion of history, the impressiveness of power and the mystique of a religion. Many Colonials convinced themselves that its best was better than anybody else's and its worst was not as bad as the imperial systems of the French and Dutch.

To reject so pervasive a Universal was intellectually difficult even if it was politically desirable. But in the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties the question of rejection had not yet arisen in Guyana or in the rest of the West Indies for that matter. There was, however, one racial group in Guyana whose attitude to things British was ambivalent – the East Indians. In the nineteenth century many of them availed themselves of the opportunity written into their contracts to return to India. Many more of them kept the possibility of returning open, even when they were rooting themselves in the soil by acquiring land or making themselves wealthy by trade. In the early twentieth century Commissioners appointed by the Indian government visited Guyana to inquire into the working and living conditions of the indentured Indians. Hindu and Moslem missionaries also visited the country to revive their flagging religious energies. Official India seemed to care about their welfare and Religious India about their souls. This helped to preserve a powerful sense of the presence of India in Guyana.

On another level India was important too. The small group of educated Indians in the nineteen-twenties and thirties were aware that Indian civilisation possessed many features which even the Imperial British, generally contemptuous of the native cultures, had shown a warm admiration for. As the Nationalist Party gained ground in India Gandhi, Nehru and their followers also preached the antiquity of Indian culture, its equality and sometimes even its superiority to the manners and morals of the British. But before the nineteen-forties it was not clear to anyone that Home Rule for India would spell the

dissolution of the empire. Ambitious Indians in Guyana therefore felt that they had two mothers; Mother India and Mother England. As their achievements alternated with their frustrations, so did the intensity of their filial devotion vary from the one mother to the other. Here the contrast between the attitudes of educated Blacks and educated Indians is instructive. Up to the forties the Blacks, with a few significant exceptions, assumed that authentic Africa was the same as backward Africa. Their mother country was unequivocally Britain. For the Indians, however, there was not one source of confidence and identity but two. This situation was to create acute problems for Guyana in its advance to independence.

The Second World War broke the belief in the impregnability of British power. It also led to the questioning of the ethics of empire. By the end of the nineteen-forties the independence of India had made anti-colonialism not only fashionable but feasible among intellectuals throughout the British Dominions. But men accustomed to a pervasive and powerful Universal find it difficult to give it up for a restricted Particular, unless of course they can invest the Particular with Universal qualities. It was intellectually easier to replace a discredited Universal with a more creditable and fashionable one. Equally important, the rejection of an empire so instinct with a sense of history demanded a counter-history to replace it. It is not surprising therefore that Dr. Jagan and Mr. Burnham and the mulatto intellectuals who led the Anti-Colonial movement in Guyana in the early fifties were enthusiastic Marxists who had read not only their Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin, but also their Plekhanov and Luxemburg as well. Marxism had all the qualities of a great Universal. It had a philosophy of history, an ethic for changing mankind and a blueprint for a new Utopian society. It was as satisfying a religion to the new intellectuals as the imperial idea had been to the old colonials.

Such nationalism as the leaders of the Peoples Progressive Party possessed in the early fifties was really a subsidiary to their belief in the universal dogmas of Marxism. Local conditions could, it was argued, colour the movement and even perhaps decide its timing, but they could not determine its nature. The struggle of the working classes in Guyana was the same as the struggle of the working classes everywhere, and Guyanese nationalism merely meant the right of the people of Guyana to be free from the imperial incubus in order to pursue universal socialist principles. The quest for identity was therefore really a matter of getting into the mainstream of world history; the international identity was the substance of which the local identity was merely a pleasing shadow.

It is interesting to contrast at this point the attitudes of the Marxist anti-colonials in Guyana with those of the men who were leading

Jamaica to independence. In the latter country Marxists were few and of no influence. Both Mr Bustamente and Mr Manley saw the rejection of empire as the logical outcome of British ideals. They were rejecting British power in the name of British principles. They were committed to the liberal Westminster pattern of a two-party democracy, the supremacy of the law and the freedom of the individual which they regarded as universal rules suited for all men everywhere, brought to fruition in Britain's history but held in abeyance by Britain's empire. Any idea that they could have an identity that was fundamentally different from the British would have struck them as ludicrous. They were deeply British by principle, coloured by race, tropical by location and assuredly Christian by religion.

The Marxist Universal in Guyana was not powerful enough to prevent the competition between Blacks and Indians, which emerged clearly by the mid nineteen-fifties. Dr Jagan and Mr Burnham had been elected to government in 1953. Their impatience with such limited power as they did possess and their well-known communist convictions led to the suspension of the constitution a few months after their election and the dismissal of their party from office. Out of power, the cracks in the party showed very clearly, indicating that it had been a fragile coalition of Blacks and Indians and ominously foreshadowing an acute competition between the two races now that political power was becoming available. By 1955 the party had split into predominantly Black and Indian sections, with those intellectuals devoted to the Marxist Universal trailing disconsolately behind each group. This of course has been the experience of a number of multi-racial societies on the verge of independence. The withdrawal of imperial power usually produces a succession war, the question of home rule invariably raising the question of who will rule at home. Peoples who have been known to live peaceably side by side when the imperial power was present and politics was the preserve only of the few have, when politics becomes the prerogative of the masses, usually had recourse to their racial identity in order the better to fight the battle for political power. Guyana was a typical case in point.

It was at this stage that the problem of identity assumed crucial proportions. The Indians in their thrust for political power, despite Dr Jagan's continued emphasis on Marxist doctrine and international communist connections, dwelt increasingly on the importance of being Indian, of returning to the culture of Mother India, purified of Creole 'taints' and thus having an authentic identity owing little to the British and nothing to the blacks. It was nationalism gone racial. From a position of rejecting one Universal in favour of another, the Indians were rejecting what they now regarded as a Particular (Britain) that had made itself too powerful by empire in favour of a Particular which had freed itself from empire (India) and was reviving its ancient

wisdom, purity and power. It was, in fact, an attempt to return to the womb from which to draw strength, cohesion and confidence in order to dominate the political scene which their numbers certainly entitled them to do. They were going to ensure that although they were Guyanese by geography and English by speech, they were Indian by culture and psychology. There is a sense in which they introduced a Jewish dimension into their quest for identity; they were part of a great Diaspora forced to take on the gestures and manners of the environment in which they had been washed up, but spiritually they were still at home.

With the racial competition for political power becoming more acute as the prospect of independence loomed larger, it was inevitable that Indian claims to authenticity should spark off similar claims in people of African descent. Among a few of the Black people during the nineteenth century, as among many of the Black people in the United States at the same time, there existed a sense of kinship with Ethiopia, as an ancient independent African kingdom whose reputation was sanctified by Biblical references, whose civilisation was respected by Europeans and whose Christianity was as old as that of Rome and much older than that of Britain. If West Africa could not supply the pedigree these Blacks needed, they sought it in East Africa. Significantly about the same time that the Peoples Progressive Party split into Indian and Black sections, Ghana gained her independence; Nkrumah emerged as a dynamic leader and an African visionary in whose personality and politics the great Nehru himself rejoiced. Guyanese Blacks could now match Guyanese Indians in their pride in the Mother Land, and as Nkrumah began to preach the African Personality and to revive the memories of African civilisations, distinguished and sophisticated before the white man ever set foot in Africa, so Blacks in Guyana confidently claimed an authenticity, the source of which lay across the Atlantic. They too were returning to the womb.

By the beginning of the sixties Guyanese nationalism could only be defined negatively as the equal desire of two races to achieve independence from Britain. Competition for political power had triggered off the quest for separate identities, which in turn had bolstered a sense of historical and racial separateness in a community where the two peoples had lived cheek by jowl for decades. As often happens the mythology of politics was creating its own perilous reality. One could hardly talk of a Guyanese nation in the early sixties for the things that united the two races were certainly weaker than the things that divided them.

It was precisely at this period, however, that there appeared another and more constructive approach to the problem of identity advocated

by those who feared first a civil war and then the partition of Guyana. Some politicians and intellectuals argued that whilst the importance of a return to the womb should not be overlooked, it was more important to find the Guyanese self in the history, short though it was, of Guyana. The traditional way of writing Guyanese history was recording the exploits of Europeans; it was looking at Guyana from outside downwards. But, the argument ran, there was another way of seeing Guyanese history, that of looking at it from the inside upwards. It was not European exploits that were important, it was the reaction of the common people to European exploitation. This approach would reveal a history of struggle and endurance, a history of various forms of resistance mounted first by the African slaves then later by the indentured immigrants on the plantations. It would also reveal the common patterns which the various peoples worked out to accommodate themselves to a harsh environment. If the plantation was a cruel but common crucible through which most of the people of Guyana had passed, and against which they had struggled, then their common suffering and their common resistance would be the best foundation for a sense of common identity. Since independence was near and both Dr Jagan and Mr Burnham considered it important that the old economic structures should be radically altered, the exponents of this approach argued that the theme of resistance to the plantation system, as the symbol of all that is bad in capitalism, should be the dominant motif in Guyanese history and the coping stone of Guyanese identity. Their motto was simple; 'I resist, therefore I am.'

Using the analogy of a divided nation being drawn together by the threat of external invasion, they maintained that the Guyanese people would achieve a sense of common being by the identification of both the enemies they had had to struggle against in the past, and the enemies they would have to struggle against in the future. One of the important results of this position has been a considerable interest in slave rebellions; in Indian riots on the estates; and the foundation of Black as well as Indian villages – developments which were seen as war against the plantation conducted by different means. Certainly, renewed interest was taken in the Berbice slave rebellion which broke out on 23 February 1763. As one of the more serious uprisings in the history of the New World, it was looked upon as a focal point around which to weave Guyanese nationalism; the thesis being that to Indians and Blacks the plantation system was such a horrific experience that the first serious blow struck against it would be of great emotional interest to both races.

A sense of identity is best expressed by symbols, or heroes, and it is often difficult to distinguish between the hero as a man and the hero as a symbol. One of the leaders of the Berbice slave revolt, Cuffy, was in fact selected when Guyana became a Cooperative Republic in 1970 as

the first national hero. At the present stage of historical research not a great deal is known about this man. He emerges from one account of the rebellion as having definite ideas of dividing Berbice into an upper and lower region – the former being free and Black, the latter being white and slave owning. But he is more important as a symbol: a symbol of resistance to white overlordship, of the dignity of down-trodden Colonial peoples, of an imaginative attempt to construct a new society and to create a state where the mighty will have no seats and the humble and meek will be exalted.

Cuffy may well pass into literature, for there are already a number of young Guyanese poets and would-be novelists who intend to write about him, to recapture his personality or to re-create it and to spell out the dilemmas which led to his ultimate suicide. Although nothing is known of his appearance, the government plans to erect a statue to him with the appropriate symbolism of revolt and renewal: he will thus be a Black male equivalent of the statue of Queen Boadicea on the Embankment of the Thames. At another level research is being conducted into the Berbice revolt, both by those who are interested in the re-appraisal of Black history in the New World – part of the current vogue of Black studies – as well as by those who are mainly interested in deepening their understanding of Guyana's history. A translation of the diary of Van Hooghenheim, the Dutch Governor of Berbice during the rebellion, which contains some information about Cuffy and a great deal more about the rebellion in general, has just been completed and other documents dealing with the subject will soon be available in English.

The Department of History at the University of Guyana, conscious of the importance men attach to its subject in their search for identity, offers to the students, among other things, courses in both West African and Indian history, as well as a course entitled 'A Comparative Study of Slave Societies in the New World' and compulsory courses on West Indian and Guyanese history. The fundamental aim of this pattern of courses is to achieve among students of African and Indian origins an equilibrium of historical respect. For Indians it can and sometimes does mean the beginning of an appreciation of African civilisations, and for Black students it can and sometimes does mean the beginning of an appreciation of the complexity, diversity and sophistication of Indian culture. For both it often means destruction of mythology about their own respective mother continents and therefore a more realistic and more detached attitude to the study of the past. The result of teaching these courses may well be to take the fanaticism out of the fervour to find roots and to temper the students' belief in separate and distinct heritages with the study of their experience in the New World – which is the experience of mixing and mingling. This is a necessarily slow and sophisticated process, the

results of which will be seen only over a period of time but are not instantly recognisable; and it has to co-exist with strong currents of thought recently flowing from the United States in the form of Black Power.

Although the name of this state of mind originated in North America and is usually interpreted as an export from that quarter, yet the Black Power leaders in the Caribbean and Guyana have a different set of objectives to achieve and a more complex set of circumstances with which to cope. Black Power in the United States usually means the attempt to locate the power over Black communities in Black hands and thus to create a state within a state. The Black Power advocates in the Caribbean recognise that power is already in Black hands; but they stigmatise these hands as élitist, as bolstering the old structures which the whites had built. In short, their thesis is that the colour of the exploiters in the Caribbean has changed, but the exploitation remains the same; the new politician is the old planter gone black. These men want a revolution in which the Black masses of the Caribbean will become the real rather than the nominal wielders of power, both economic and political.

But such a change in the structures of power demands a change in the Black man's image of himself. Because he originated from the continent most subject in the last five centuries to depredation in the form of white or Arab slave trade and because he belongs to the people most subject to oppression, cultural and economic, in the form of slavery, the Black man is more particularly fitted than any other race to lead the struggle of the world's poor against the world's rich. Black people, so Black Power advocates argue, if they understand their role aright have the power to be collectively the Messiahs of the Third World. They can, by their leadership, deliver the Third World from the thralldom of the First, achieving in the process a more just distribution of the world's goods. This would be the Black man's cosmic burden, and his identity strengthened by suffering would now be vindicated by the struggle to emancipate other sufferers.

Ironically, the attempt to apply the doctrines of Black Power to a society like Jamaica where most people are variations of blackness provoked a rigidly conservative backlash from the mulattoes and the upper class Blacks, who felt themselves threatened by men they regarded as both racist and radical. But to apply these doctrines to a society like Guyana where more than half the population is of Indian origin caused even greater tremors of apprehension and tended to stiffen the Indian resolve to consider themselves as a separate people with a separate identity. To them Black Power meant only one thing – perpetual Black domination and that by a group which they regarded as more fanatical in their racism than the present Black holders of power because they feed more avidly on historical resentment.

At this point the exponents of Black Power in Guyana (and in Trinidad) tempering their doctrine to their environment, developed a broader, more catholic concept of their message. Black meant not only of African descent, but also non-white. More than that, black was really an economic badge which could embrace all the poor peoples of the earth. As white had universally become a synonym for Western and wealthy, so black, its total opposite, would become a synonym of non-Western and poor. It was really a symbol of a condition rather than a colour and the whole of the underdeveloped world could unite around it.

For a very few Indians in Guyana this made sense; for the vast majority, however, it was a dangerous distortion of the truth. They were not black, they argued, but brown, for black was a particular colour not a universal symbol. Once Black Power was preached, the Indians put up their defences even higher, as they interpreted it as yet another attempt by the peoples of African descent to force Indians to shed their precious heritage. The movement called 'Black Power' in Guyana did not reach the revolutionary proportions it achieved in Trinidad, where in 1970 it severely threatened Dr Eric Williams' government. But its effect was to close Indian ranks and strengthen the move for increased contacts with India and an Indian Renaissance based on Classical Indian culture.

The quest for identity thus seems to have led only to an impasse, to the decision of two races to search for their souls separately. Fortunately, this is not the whole story; existing between these parallel but hostile developments there has been for some time now another school of thought whose preoccupations are less with purity and pedigree and more with creative fusion, or what the distinguished Guyanese poet Martin Carter called 'the cross pollination of cultures'. This is sometimes called the Mulatto vision of Guyana, as it advocates glory in the mixing of genes and the smudging of traditions and takes its stand on the thesis that the richest civilisations have been those which have encouraged several traditions and cultures to mingle and merge, thus it is less interested in the preservation of the old orthodoxies and more interested in adventurous adaptation and creation.

The exponents of this school of thought advance a number of propositions about both the genetic and cultural life of Guyana, which they maintain make the pursuit of separate identities by the two major race groups chimerical. They use the history of Guyana, not so much to establish patterns of resistance, though they do not regard this as unimportant, but to establish patterns of accommodation and cultural borrowing among the races. One of their most important propositions is that genetic purity is often illusory in Guyana, even when people appear to be unmixed members of one ethnic group. For instance,

many persons who look pure Black can point – and in the old Colonial days when Black was not considered beautiful often did point – to mixed ancestry. They would admit that this is less true of Indians than it is of the other races, but even among the former there are often unadmitted ancestors of another race.

But far more important than genetic mixing is the fact of cultural borrowing, which these exponents claim has proceeded to an advanced degree and which, incidentally, recent research into nineteenth and twentieth century Guyanese history tends to confirm. For instance, Blacks, Portuguese and Chinese repeatedly took part in the 'Tadja', a festival of the Shia sect of Islam which commemorates the murder of Mohammed's two grandsons. The celebration was highly dramatic, almost frenzied, and processional; and it became a matter of pride in the early twentieth century for Black men to carry the Tadja Tower which was the replica of the murdered boys' tomb, on their shoulders to deposit it into a river. Further, in a few parts of Guyana Blacks mounted their own Tadja ceremony, incorporating into the traditional rites African or Creole elements.

The two peoples living side by side in villages came to interchange their myths and mythological interpretations of illness or psychic phenomena so that the 'Ole Haig', a vampire in the form of an old woman, and a belief of distinctly West African origin, came to prey with total impartiality on children of all races. The 'Obeah man' was a figure of distinctly West African genesis, a combination of prophet, priest, doctor and sorcerer, but towards the end of the nineteenth century Indian 'Obeah men' made their appearance, uniting in their persons and their prescriptions Indian and African techniques for controlling other peoples' emotions and shaping the future.

The Mulatto fusionists also point to the modifications in Hindu theology and Muslim practice made by Indians as a result of daily contact with their Black Christian brethren and the recourse had by Blacks to Hindu mythology in order to help them digest some of the more difficult and contradictory points of Christian doctrine. The two peoples not only borrowed each other's demons, they sometimes confused each other's divinities.

Recently scholars of language have demonstrated that dialects developed on the Guyanese estates during slavery as the normal currency of communication between master and slave were taken over by the Indians in their days of indenture, until now it is the Indians not the Blacks who are the 'pure' speakers of Creolese. Since language is not only a method of communication, but a way of perceiving things, it is impossible for the Indian in Guyana to be the same as his brethren in

those parts of India from which his ancestors came. His perceptions have changed with his vernacular and the same is true of people from West Africa who came to the West Indies and Guyana earlier on.

If Guyanese history demonstrates anything, so the advocates of this line maintain, it is how much unconscious fusion has already taken place. However, because the fusion by its very nature is a new thing and cannot therefore be easily categorised, the moment men think intellectually about identity they search for established traditions, old and respected, and thus reject the reality of fusion for the myth of historical purity.

Fusion being a fact of life, it ought to be made a positive value and to become the objective to which Guyanese national purposes are directed. The Guyanese searching for his identity is in reality searching less for the past than for the future. His identity is not so much a fact capable of precise description or definition as an on-going process still in its embryonic stages. In short, Guyana is really a land of Abrahams called forth, as the Book of Genesis has it, to be ancestors who will create institutions and patterns of life for their posterity rather than a land of descendants preoccupied with pedigree. For those who think this way the artist, whether he be poet, novelist, sculptor or choreographer, becomes an important figure, somewhat akin to the prophets of Old Testament society. The Jewish prophets were both the interpreters of the stage to which their people had reached and the visionaries who pointed to the new directions in which they ought to go. Similarly the artist's job will be to mirror the point to which Guyanese society will have evolved, with both its strength and its weakness, as well as to deepen the fusion of the diverse elements and in so doing create new points of departure. For this school of thought, what the politicians do in creating institutions and situations in which people can work together is necessary but insufficient. It is only the artist who can, by the symbolism he devises, involve the whole man, conscious and sub-conscious in a total response to his vision and therefore create a wider range of sensitivity and a new sort of person.

Earlier on I said that in the search for identity the original inhabitants – the Amerindians – were often dismissed as gentle nonentities. To this school of thought, however, the Amerindian becomes crucial. His is the only authentic cosmology rooted in the soil and growing out of it. If there is an ancestor to the modern Guyanese it is certainly he. Until, therefore, his psychic and artistic depths are brought into the mainstream of Guyanese consciousness their identity will never be quite authentic. During the Caribbean Festival of Creative Arts held in Guyana in 1972 a play called 'Couvade' by Michael Gilkes was performed, with the search for identity as its theme. It sums up these views I have been outlining with considerable poetic and dramatic

power. The central figure, part Black, part Amerindian, and married to an Indian girl, is obsessed with completing a painting before either his sight or his reason gives out. The motifs of the painting are Amerindian, but they are curiously infused throughout with a sense of African and Indian mythology, so that as the painting progresses the artist is haunted by ancestral spirits from West Africa, from India and from the depths of Guyana. When finally he loses both his sight and his mind the painting descends on him in the form of a robe, thereby giving him a new being and symbolically the play ends with the birth of his child, who is both genetically and culturally a fused being, and who represents the birth of a new kind of man with a new way of seeing reality, looking towards the future and drawing strength from a multiple past.

This is the most hopeful approach to the quest for identity in a racially divided and young nation. In fact the most fruitful line of thought in the possession of this school is their approach to history. History for them is really two distinct concepts under the umbrella of a single name. The first is the recollection of things past as well as the activity of writing and analysis which goes with it. The second is the continuous activity of the present in which men create institutions and philosophies in response to the pressures and forces acting upon them. Feeling that Guyanese and other West Indians spend too much of their time recriminating on the memories of an exploited past, these people want greater emphasis put on history in the second sense of the active and creative response to current events. They do not undervalue the job of the historian or the enlarged experience which goes with the study of history. But they argue that the experience is valuable precisely because it enriches the consciousness of those who, in their present activities, must order the course of future events and if, as they maintain, the present generation of Guyanese are really ancestors because of their consciousness of heightened responsibility then the history they make is far more important than the history they remember.

This is a distinctly healthy trend for it tends to generate the same sort of energy as explorers, who feel themselves on the edge of a great discovery, experience. It is also the right sort of atmosphere for the arts to flourish in, for adaptation and experiment to become the keynotes of national life and for pragmatic, rather than dogmatic attitudes to prevail. Ironically, this is precisely what the older, more developed societies of Europe are trying to encourage among their people, even though they have long histories behind them and solid traditions to bolster their confidence.

If this school of thought gains ground in Guyana, and there are indications that it will, Guyanese will stop looking for identity and get on

with the much more exciting job of making a mosaic without predetermining what its final appearance will be. In New World multi-racial societies, perhaps multi-racial societies everywhere, this seems to be the only way out. Identity, like love, is least found where it is most laboriously sought. But an observer may well ask what is the Guyanese government doing to create the proper climate in which the fusion of psyches can take place; and this is a legitimate question because in Third World societies so much depends on government action that without a farseeing policy from the top the vision of the artist will remain the substance of things hoped for rather than the evidence of things seen.

Institutionally, the Guyana government has adopted a policy of what can be called the parity of religious observance. Up to the early sixties the festivals honoured by public holidays were Christian, like Christmas, Easter, Whitsun, or of British imperial origin, like New Year's Day and August Bank Holiday. Hindus and Muslims celebrated their major festivals in a private capacity whilst Christians went to work. Dr Jagan's government began and Mr Burnham's government has completed the change. The great festivals of the three major religions in Guyana are now all public holidays, thus allowing men of all persuasions to join in the celebrations and incidentally giving them the opportunity to learn their inner and spiritual meanings as they enjoy the outward and physical display. Equally significant, Christians in Guyana have become increasingly aware of the basic similarities between their own great festivals and those of Hinduism and the more sophisticated of them are taking a new look at both the symbolism and the theology of their religion.

To rescue the Amerindians from the historical limbo to which they have been condemned since the end of slavery, Guyana chose the occasion of the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations held in Georgetown in August 1972 to emphasise the importance of the Amerindian heritage. Instead of constructing a vast concrete and pompous palace to house the delegates and their deliberations, the government commissioned the tribe of the Wai-Wai's to erect a Powwow House, known in their language as Umana Yama, and built with their traditional implements. A superb thatched circular building with a conical roof is now the chief physical memento of the Non-Aligned Conference, giving to Georgetown a distinctly pre-Colombian touch; it is now used for public receptions. During the Conference, all the important centres housing the delegates were given Amerindian names which have passed into the popular parlance of the Guyanese.

Conscious of the role of the artist as prophet and interpreter, the Guyana government has been host in the last three years to two conferences of creative artists who have explored the themes of

identity, history and creativity in the Caribbean. At the first of these conferences the idea was seized upon of holding a grand Caribbean Festival of Creative Arts in Georgetown and from August to September 1972 large numbers of artists from places ranging from North East Brazil to Mexico collected in Georgetown to demonstrate their virtuosity with the drum, the dance, the drama, and their skill in painting, poetry, sculpture and creative writing. It was a veritable supermarket of Caribbean experiences and the Guyanese, the host to the conference, learnt a great deal more about themselves by contrasting their own perceptions and performances with those of their Caribbean brethren. One result of this is that the place of the artist is now better appreciated and the importance of myths and symbols in the shaping of people's self-awareness better understood. Perhaps most significant of all, Guyanese now take a new and more understanding view of the Amerindians, prodded to this by their Latin American brethren, whose cultural renaissance is largely due to the re-discovery of the Indians in their midst. Some Guyanese now go so far as to say 'Unless ye be baptised into the soul of the Amerindian, ye cannot be made whole.' This is not universally accepted, but is an extremely healthy indication of the cultural sensitivity of the nation.

Thus, in the quest for identity in Guyana the wheel has come full circle and Columbus' dismissal and humiliation of the indigenous inhabitants is being atoned for. But a wheel does not only go in circles, it also goes in new directions, if the will is there, and for once there is a healthy correspondence between the bold economic departures initiated by the government and the bold cultural initiatives encouraged and blessed by it.